

Karen Hall, who has remodeled the Camas Hotel with her husband, Tom, shows off the honeymoon suite jacuzzi. The couple believes downtown Camas is a great match for their boutique hotel.



Couple bring nearly 100-year old downtown hotel back to its former glory



## Hotel:

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members or businesspeople that is more convenient than the chain lodging outlets in east Vancouver, she said.

"We decided to give it a go. We love the town of Camas," Tom said.

The early signs are positive: Since a "soft opening" on the July 4th weekend, all 10 completely redone rooms on the second floor have been going at a "steady" rate, Karen reports.

That includes the Halls' first sold-out weekend during last month's Camas Days festival.

Business remains good on the third floor, not yet remodeled, too. That's where 17 rooms may be booked for extended stays, with host-type shared bathrooms and kitchen space.

"We're pretty happy, for now," Karen said.

Here's what welcomes guests in the modernized rooms, at "introductory" rates that range from \$69-\$96 midweek to \$72-\$102 on weekends (there also are two pairs of adjoining rooms that can be booked as suites):

■ Resort-quality beds and plush, all-natural bed sheets with higher thread counts commonly found in Europe.

■ Handsome furniture, modern accessories and private baths, even a large Jacuzzi in the honeymoon suite.

■ A breakfast nook on the third floor with refrigerator and microwave oven, plus an outdoor terrace with chairs and tables.

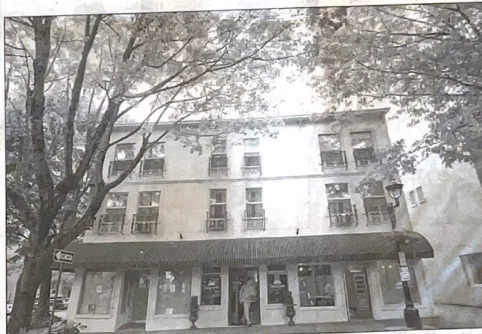
■ Extra touches, from vintage Camas photos in the hallways to locally supplied paintings and ceramics sprinkled around.

("There's a little bit of everybody in town," Karen explains, ticking off the shops she utilized).

■ From the pinstriped awnings and classic, vertical sign outside to the inside decor, Tom and Karen took care to nurture a distinct turn-of-the-(20th) century feel. Decorative balconies, light fixtures and restored heat radiators in the rooms burnish the ambience.

And, coming soon: Harwood's a martini bar and restaurant (think steak, seafood and tapas) that will occupy the Cedar Street ground level space, with stairs leading to the terrace.

Four-legged companions are



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Karen and Tom have worked to re-create the turn-of-the-century feel for the Camas Hotel. The city's oldest surviving commercial building was once called the Commercial Hotel.

welcome at the hotel. "We're pet-friendly," Karen said.

### Latest challenge

It's been a labor of love for the couple, in their 50s, who moved from Ojai, Calif., last year.

For more than a decade they've made a go in real estate, constructing large spreads they could live in, then moving on.

They scouted the Vancouver-Portland area for a venture after Karen's son took a job here.

"We were looking for a project we could keep, and keep building," Karen said. For now, the couple dwells in private quarters behind the hotel's front desk.

Tom's been a project manager for high-end work — the type of stuff highlighted on the cover of

"Architectural Digest" magazine, for example — such as a sparkling private residence on China's Hong Kong Island, or a Tuscan-style home in Ojai.

So, there was no panic after the Halls plunked down \$700,000 for the Camas landmark, "as is," last September.

Not when the economy immediately cratered. Not when the cost of renovations kept soaring, as one fix led to another and another (a phenomenon with which any DIY veteran could sympathize).

"It's like torture by a thousand slashes.... It just adds up," Tom said.

The Halls say they've poured another \$350,000 to \$400,000 into the old place, refusing to cut corners. "Double what we expected," Karen said. That will

widen the time needed to reap their investment, but neither partner complains much.

"That's to be expected on something like this," said Karen, ever the diplomat. "We're

very happy with the results." So are guests, judging by their written comments and feedback. Several travelers have complimented the European touch, Karen said. Thanks to Web links and cell phones, word is rapidly spreading, she said.

### Downtown boost

Camas denizens have noticed, too.

"People have been coming by daily," Karen said. Some with long memories have shed tears, she said. "People love this community. They're glad to see someone fix this up."

A big fan has watched from next door on Fourth Avenue's main drag.

"What they've done is just phenomenal, a real shot in the arm for us," said Carol Breiter, who just concluded her run as owner of the Paper Lantern shop. Her store has been replaced by The Uncommon Gift, which has moved from its former site. "It's going to be a tremendous boost for the town," she said.

Karen and Tom say city leaders have met them with open arms, as have local businesses. Karen already sits on the board of the Downtown Vision Coalition, a public-private partnership working to improve the central district.

She lists the attributes downtown offers visitors, such as all the shops and good restaurants with a wide variety of food.

But there's one missing item atop the wish-list: "We need a good brew pub," she said.

# Camas' suite restoration



Photos by ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Co-owner Tom Hall shows off a rooftop terrace outside the Mill Room, which gives Camas Hotel guests a view of the namesake paper mill. A new martini bar-restaurant on Cedar Street will have access to the terrace.

By HOWARD BUCK

Columbian staff writer

It wasn't the grand plan, to open a boutique hotel during America's worst recession in half a century.

But owners Karen and Tom Hall can take comfort in this: Their marvelously renovated Camas Hotel has anchored a busy corner of Fourth Avenue for nearly 100 years, and weathered times both good and bad.

The Halls, and some of their business neighbors, believe the hotel will inject new life into downtown Camas just when

it's most needed.

"Camas is beginning to realize it's got a destination aspect," said Karen Hall, the marketing mind of the dynamic duo (her husband, Tom, sweats more over the blueprints and craft work).

No longer is the mill town just a passing thought for tourists checking out the Columbia River Gorge, Karen said.

Camas itself is drawing more fans. And it has grown enough to support a comfy, classy hotel for visiting family.

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### CAMAS HOTEL

■ 405 N.E. Fourth Ave., Camas; 360-834-5722, or [www.camashotel.com](http://www.camashotel.com).

### IDENTITY SWITCH

■ The three-story building — the oldest surviving commercial building in Camas — opened in 1911 as the Commercial Hotel. Nearly on Fourth Avenue, close to the city's booming paper mill, stood the Camas Hotel. But after the latter was razed in 1935, owners appropriated the name, which has stuck ever since.